

Mindfulness and memory

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2.3 Mindfulness and memory

2.3.1 Note that from the start, we have *not* mentioned “memory of things long past” as a definition of *sati*. This is simply because it does not fit well with what is said in the suttas about how *sati* is to be practised [2.2.2]. Memory is only part of the description of the process of *sati*, “mindfulness”; that is, memory is an extension—a support of mindfulness, or a result of it—of what happens when we are mindful.

Mindfulness practice usually relates to events in the present or in the very recent past. In the context of meditation, *sati* develops when we cultivate attentive observation of our breath, for example. It is in this context of reflection that *sati* develops as memory when we intentionally recall the Dharma as we have been taught or that we have learned.¹

Another possibly relevant factor is the etymological connection between the Pali word *sati* and the cognate Sanskrit *smṛti*. “Memory” was definitely the primary meaning for the Sanskrit *smṛti*. This connection, which was well-known to monastic students and scholars of mindfulness: they had to remember these instructions and put them into practice as part of their mindfulness training. Hence, mindfulness is understood as entailing the remembering of wholesome states that we should focus on, develop and guard.

Furthermore, even more importantly, this memory is reinforced *as a result* of mindfulness itself; but the definitive feature of *sati* remains that of attentive observation. We will see this definitive role of *sati* highlighted in the parable of the city in **the Nagarôpama Sutta** (A 7.63) in the next section.

2.3.2 The Nagarôpama Sutta (A 7.63) defines the noble disciple (*ariya,sāvaka*)—one on the path of awakening (streamwinner, etc, including the arhat) as having 7 good qualities (*satta saddhamma*): *wise faith, moral shame, moral fear, deep learning in Dharma, exertiveness (in moral virtue and concentration), mindful and wise (understands the true nature of reality)*.² The quality “mindful” (*satimā*) is defined as follows:

“He is **mindful**, possessing excellent mindfulness and penetration;³ and he remembers and recalls what was done long ago, what was said long ago.”⁴

(A 7.63,25.2), SD 52.13

Clearly here, we can see how mindfulness, as taught by the Buddha, works with other spiritual qualities for the sake of gaining the path of awakening.

¹ See S:B 2:1901 n63. On *nepakka* [1.3.11].

² These 7 good qualities are, in Pali, respectively: (adj) *saddha, hirimā, ottappa, bahu-s,suta, āradha,viriya, satimā* and *paññavā* (A 7.63,19-27), SD 5.13 (2.3).

³ “Mindfulness and penetration,” *sati,nepakka*; on *nepakka*, see Vbh 249; VbhA 311 f.

⁴ *Satimā hoti paramena sati,nepakkena samannāgato cira,kataṃ pi cira,bhāsitam pi saritā anussaritā.*

2.3.3 He “**remembers and recollects**” what was said or done long ago—for effective Dharma learning and practice, we should have a good memory. The Commentary distinguishes between *sarita*, “remembering” (that is, remembering once) and *anussarita*, “recollecting” (remembering again and again). To “**remember**” means to be familiar with past events or experiences, recalling them almost at once. To “**recollect**,” on the other hand, needs some effort to recall something, and to sustain that memory in some purposeful way.

Mindfulness (*sati*), then, should be understood as functioning as memory, with which it *perceives* the present object of awareness. Mindfulness keeps up this perception: this is **attention** to the present moment, which is itself the basis for a continuing good memory. The Commentary takes the mention of *sati* here to imply all the 7 factors of awakening,⁵ of which mindfulness is the first (MA 3:30) [4.2.4]. Hence, we should add that even by itself, especially in reference to being mindful, such as while meditating, being mindful also means that we are **aware** (*sampajāna*) or “clearly knowing” what is going on before us.

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⁵ See *satta bojjhaṅga*, SD 10.15.